

## КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЯ

UDC 391

*Y. V. Bystrova*

### COSTUME SYMBOLS: TYPOLOGY OF FUNCTIONS

The article presents a conception of costume as representation of corporality. On an example of various kinds of costume we consider the symbolic mechanisms of assemblage of the collective body. Costume is based on a selection of wounds: it hides the wounds of an individual body and uncovers wounds of a collective body. We provide a classification of symbolic functions of costume. The author describes nine symbolic functions: magic, age-related, social and sexual, class, professional, regional, religious, erotic and aesthetic. Ref. 1.

*Keywords:* costume, ritual, symbol, corporality, body assemblage, representation.

*Я. В. Быстрова*

### СИМВОЛИКА КОСТЮМА: ТИПОЛОГИЯ ФУНКЦИЙ

В статье представлена концепция костюма как репрезентации телесности. На примере различных видов костюма рассматриваются символические механизмы сборки коллективного тела: он скрывает раны индивидуального тела и раскрывает раны коллективного тела. Дана классификация символических функций костюма. Автор описывает девять символических функций: магическую, возрастную, социально-половую, классовую, профессиональную, региональную, эротическую и эстетическую. Библиогр. 1 назв.

*Ключевые слова:* костюм, ритуал, символ, телесность, сборка тела, репрезентация.

Among numerous functions of clothes, of costume it is possible to mark out two functions, which vector of action and sense, to a certain extent, are opposite each other. Without pretending to exhaustive accuracy, we will designate these functions as pragmatical (aimed at protection of a body against a cold, against excessive heat, against a rain and snow and, as consequence, aimed at feeling of comfort) and symbolical (including not only accessible to consciousness of our contemporary representations of places in social hierarchy and of a material prosperity, but also hidden from his look some ritual and mythological options of costume which remain operating today). The relation between these functions is treated in favour of pragmatics (that is the clothes are always more important than a costume), from which follows that the symbols of costume are worthy of sever attention, but, finally, they appear as secondary affair.

---

*Быстрова Яна Васильевна* — кандидат философских наук, доцент, Русская христианская гуманитарная академия, Российская Федерация, Санкт-Петербург, 191023, наб. реки Фонтанки, 15; [bystrova7@yandex.ru](mailto:bystrova7@yandex.ru)

*Bystrova Yana. V.* — PhD, Associate Professor, Russian Christian humanitarian academy, 15, nab. reki Fontanka, St. Petersburg, 191023, Russian Federation; [bystrova7@yandex.ru](mailto:bystrova7@yandex.ru)

© Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, 2016

Let's notice that the costume has the right to pretend to the status of anthropological attribute, and in ethnology the person who doesn't know clothes, is equivalent not only to person without written language (to prehistoric person), but to the person incapable of distinct speech (is equivalent to conditions of homo erectus). About the same, only beyond frameworks of a materialistic picture of anthropogenesis, there narrates well-known bible myth about the Fall, one of the first consequences of which there was sense of shame and need to close a naked body. The apocryphal story looks quite natural when it tells that in paradise Adam and Eve talked in verse, and usual human speech becomes their property already behind a fencing of Eden. Thus, the human history begins equally with the opened ability to speech, and with the need for clothes.

At the same time the Bible and the theory of evolution do not give the grounds to assert that the need for the clothes, considered as the factor of anthropogenesis, is necessarily pragmatism. The so-called «primitive» man obviously prefers symbolical properties of his vestments and cares of the pragmatics not so strongly. Probably, these preferences do not change in the further history. If we admit this, some “riddles” of history can be guessed very easily. For example, on frescos of palaces of Minoan civilization there are the images of women, causing bewilderment of historians. Their clothes, obviously, are fashioned and sewed if we admit that the represented vestments really took place and are not fiction of the artist. Whereas the ancient Greeks who, according to many mythological stories, have not avoided direct influence of this civilization, and also perfectly owned geometry art, did not guess about application of this art. The assumption that they were interested in symbolical functions of their costume much more than in its pragmatics, puts all on their own places.

The clothes are an artificial limb of a skin and in this quality they borrow all symbolical functions of last. The costume is not only protected by our internal “Ego” from unfitting encroachments from the outside, but also it regulates admissible penetrations inside, adopting thereby both protective properties of a skin and transgression of corporal apertures. Therefore the chlamys of Greeks could symbolise pacifistic balance between the internal and the external, that would seem peculiar to rational atmosphere of their polis. However inevitable folds of Greeks' clothes speak about the folds of a body which are, in turn, traces of the archaic proto-script, traces of the wounds put on a body. Really, the costume almost always hides only wounds on a body. Fashioned clothes (the clothes having seams), thus, are based on selection of wounds: they hide wounds of an individual body and uncover wounds of a collective body. The soul once living in a skin, moves now in clothes, and well-known the overcoat of the Gogol's official marks itself the next stage of anthropogenesis — the occurrence of «the small person».

The man, “born in a shirt”, is considered happy because he will not have a need to think about “overcoat”. He is protected by some inhuman way, he is protected so much that any costume (the way of protection accepted by mankind) can not protect him. In costume the functions of protection are assigned to an ornament which put, as a rule, on the places that should be preserved (“amulets”) and on the places that were close to uncovered parts of a body — head, a foot of feet, palms. In symbolical sense these parts of a body appear as new corporal apertures, and through them forces of destruction and damage can penetrate.

Making a start from costume symbolics, it is the most difficult to explain a fashion phenomenon. It would seem that representation of corporality demands some stability. All

the more such key concepts for a social phenomenon of a fashion as “silhouette”, “figure” have the obvious relation to corporality, to way of assemblage of collective body. However in a fashion only one is invariable — its variability and inconstancy. There is an impression that the fashion not only renders assemblage of mankind’ collective body, but by means of very fact of own existence transforms this assemblage in eternally changing “flow of Heraclitus”. However it would be difficult to reach the deepest reasons of this mysterious variability, it is necessary to pay attention that the modern industry of a fashion (including a diet, plastic operations, bodi-bilding and even change of sex) is aimed not only on representation of corporality in costume symbolics, but, on the contrary, on embodiment of symbolical functions of collective body in an individual body which under the influence of this industry loses last boundaries of naturalness — sex, age, race.

As initial for formation of classification of symbolical options of costume it is necessary to accept concepts “clothes” and “costume”, and also basic distinction between them. In language of any nation there are the words designating these concepts. So, for example, in French a word “clothes” are translated as *vetement*. The etymology of this word goes back to a Sanskrit word *vas* which matters “to live in residence, in tent”, i.e. in dwelling. *Vas* — is a word root of *vasana*, meaning woven clothes, matter. Thus *Vas* is that is more close to a body, that surrounds with the most close layer the person, that are clothes. *Vas* is not only *Vas* of man, for example turtles *Vas* is its armour, snails *Vas* — is cockleshell, an animal *Vas* — a fell. The same relation can be traced in German language where the clothes- *Das Gewand*, and *Die Wand* is a wall. The Latin word *habitus* means a habit to have own habitation. Therefore in the French language “clothes” correspond to a word *habit* (a cover under which there man lives and which protects him from alien eyes, from bad weather etc.).

The clothes are the sum of covers on man`s body, that protecting it from environment adverse effects. The clothes protect man not only from adverse environmental conditions, from influences on his body, but also from influence of malicious magic forces. The clothes provide magic protection though first of all it concerns clothes of the ancient man. Therefore if “to use a word clothes” in strict sense it is possible to name clothes both a war paint and a tattoo of the primitive people and an armour of the medieval knight, and a modern bullet-proof vest and a gas mask, and a fashionable dress. Concept of clothes includes a dress (that covers directly a man’s body), footwear, headwears, additions (gloves, scarfs, belts, etc.). The basic function of clothes is protective function (physical and moral protection) and is utilitarian and practical function because the clothes are always connected with some practical activity of man, the clothes has definite appointment to help a man to adapt to surrounding world.

At the earliest stages of a civilization the clothes were not only “shelter” for the person, but also they symbolised certain vital processes, they were ritual object. As for life and customs of the slavic people, in order to subdue somebody, slavs made magic actions over hair of this person, over traces of his feet and over his clothes. Thus, in this European people we meet belief that the clothes of the person are almost organically connected with its bearer. Under collisions and quarrels between representatives of different collectives, if there was necessary to deride or restrain another’s collective, it would be enough to express the derisive relation to its signs: to clothes, language, etc., that, on the other side, evokes aspiration to rise on protection of clothes, language, etc. of one’s own collective. Differently, the clothes were both a thing and a sign, representating its owner.

Concept of “clothes” very often is wrongfully identified with concept “costume”. It is known that the word “costume” has come from French *costume*, mattering “custom”. Both the concept “clothes” and concept “costume” should be considered in their relation to the person, more precisely, to his corporality, including so-called “internal body”. First of all both the costume and clothes serve as a cover for a human body, but their further functional features are different. If the clothes serve first of all to protect man from adverse effects the costume is the definite figurative system of parts of clothes and the footwear, characterising individuality of man or public group. “Costume” includes not only clothes, footwear, but also a haircut, a headwear, gloves, ornaments, cosmetics. In some sense relation of costume to human body is closer and more extensive. Costume representates a human corporality more intensively. Therefore the costume can be considered only in connection with definite image of person, with his manner of bearing of clothes, in connection with his plastic arts and with his characteristic gestures. It is possible to say also that the basic difference of concept “costume” from concept “clothes” consists in that the first one contains in itself psychological and social and cultural characteristics of the person, otherwise, it’s image of his corporality. The etymology of a word “costume” also is not accidental, because the costume always represents external manifestation of something settled, essential, that is of custom.

Such understanding of the content of concept “costume” is not purely contemporary because the dictionary of the French academy of 1740 gives already treatment of costume as a sign distinguishing man, helping him to build harmonious relations with the environment, reflecting custom of the given social group. The costume is a certain ritual, it is the certificate of cognizance, acquaintance, it is expression of certain signs of group, but not of individual. At the same time the costume is definite way of actions. *Modus vivendi*, “mode of existence” is translated in French as *le mode de vie*, and from this expression the word “fashion”, “mode” has been formed.

The costume represents itself as the major sign of definite cultural and historical formation. The fair statement is that if everything had disappeared, and there was only a female costume, it would be possible by means of this costume to restore aesthetic culture of the last epoch. As for expert the costume structure gives more information about character, customs, views and behaviour of the person, than the structure of his forehead, his nose or his chin, having ultimately casual value. The costume can be considered as a visual projection of all aspects social, material and technological level of society development. But if to compare costume with other objects of applied art it becomes obvious that in the greatest measure it is directly connected with image of man, with his outlook, with his mode of action.

The costume expresses individuality of a man from certain ethnic or social group. Therefore the costume is an important element of any cultural system, of any historical type of civilization. Its geometry, its forms can express the most complicated philosophical ideas. The costume reflects serious changes in society and in culture development, it can be characterised as crystallisation of the most expressive features of time. But, perhaps, the most important factor, defining the image and the form of costume, is the figure of a human body with its bends, with its posture etc. Finally it is the figure that causes character of forms of costume and an arrangement of its elements and its colour and its details. For example, during an epoch of Italian Renaissance 14<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries the natural statement of a figure corresponds to freely hanging down, streaming folds of clothes, to soft sleeves,

slightly designated, not tightened waist. In a counterbalance to this image there is a costume of the period of the Spanish Renaissance of 16<sup>th</sup> century with its armour-clad forms, with a skintight bodice, falling by wedge on a stomach. This or that historical type of costume is always connected with image or type of man, with its figure, with contours of his corporality changing as consequence of historical changes. It is always connected with the style dominating in this or that historical time, with customs, with traditions rooting in deep layers of culture. As a rule, even the costume name bears in itself indication on these cultural and historical signs. Such example is female costume of the epoch of the French revolution, costume of epoch Biedermeier, costume of empire style, costume of the gentleman from business circles.

Proceeding from this distinction between costume and clothes it is necessary to pass to the characteristic of their functions. The basic functions of clothes — protective (including both physical and symbolical protection) and utilitarian. The clothes are always connected with any version of man`s practical activity, they have quite definite predestination and finally always helps man to adapt to surrounding world. Any object of clothes is a thing which is used and which carries out one or several functions. Certainly, the clothes have also aesthetic function, it, in addition, should decorate man. As well as any thing, clothes are based on indissoluble connection of beauty and benefit.

As to costume it carries out the same functions, as clothes: protective and utilitarian. In detail the concrete kind of costume and any definite version of clothes can coincide with each other. Distinction between costume and clothes can be understood as purely functional distinction. If firstly we mean utilitarian functions it is a question of clothes. If on the foreground there are symbolical functions, and utilitarian depart on the second plane, we have then not clothes, but costume. Really, major function of costume is the sign because it gives to surrounding world the major information about man: about its social status, political predilections, about religious beliefs, about aesthetic taste etc. Therefore, as a rule, under the description of function of costume one usually resort to their rather long list. In the special literature the following number of functions of costume is usually allocated:

1) **magic** which assumes organic inclusion of costume in mystical ritual. Between the purposes and ritual forms exists not only symbolical conformity, but elements of costume carry out a magic role taken away by it.

2) **age-related** when the costume specifies, or, on the contrary, hides age of man or woman. In traditional societies the costume accurately defined more age of man, and any its defined element, for example, colour of clothes at Tadjiks, colour of a headwear in the Hungarian female traditional costume, served as a special sign for this aim. In a modern European costume the age is often masked.

3) **social and sexual** — almost any traditional costume specifies not only on a sex of person, but also on his ( her) family status. For example, on a female costume it was almost always possible to define, whether this girl is unmarried or she is “the marriageable” one, betrothed bride, the married woman or the widow, etc. In a traditional society attempts to bear clothes not corresponding to the social and sexual status were strictly stopped. In a modern costume this function has almost completely disappeared, and not only family status, but frequently also a sex of person it is impossible to define on his (her) costume.

4) **class** — costume designates the belonging of the person to certain estate, or to a social class, to certain social stratum. In the more general sense the same function connects the person and his (her) social status. Though in modern culture this function of costume

has not disappeared yet, it is possible to assert that it operates not so strictly as in a class society. G. Zimmel connects a fashion phenomenon in which basis there lies dominant for modern culture process relativisation of cultural values with this function. The fashion phenomenon arises when class, estate group partitions in a society are still strong enough, but at the same time there is a possibility for representatives of the lower class to occupy higher position, and on the contrary. The fashion arises as aspiration of man by means of costume to raise own social status, to give out himself for the representative of higher social stratum.[1]

5) **professional** — costume can indicate an occupation of person, on his (her) belonging to the definitive professional environment. Especially strongly this function of costume has been expressed in the Middle Ages when representatives of certain trades (physicians, lawyers, university professors), members of craft guilds wore special clothes which differed by breed and colour. In a modern costume this function is shown only in a working uniform though so-called “official style” in clothes also can be connected with professional characteristics of costume.

6) **regional** — costume can indicate regional tradition in clothes, connected with climatic features of region, with some mode of life and with national traditions of the people living in it. The national costume in this respect is a version of regional one. The modern costume, dynamics of its development is based on “international” style, and certain regional features of clothes will be perceived more likely not as self-valuable, but as a sign of backwardness from a fashion which does not know the state and other borders.

7) **religious** — in traditional societies costume could not only designate the belonging of any person to certain religious faith, but also it could indicate his (her) position in corresponding clerical or other hierarchy. For example, in 16<sup>th</sup> century in France it was possible by means of costume to distinguish the Catholic from the Huguenot (Protestant), in 17<sup>th</sup> century in England — the adherent of Anglican church from puritans. Possibly, it is with this function that necessary to connect mythological symbolics of costume.

8) **erotic** — costume often acts as means to draw attention of the representative of an opposite sex. This function is connected both with social and sexual function and with class functions of costume.

9) **aesthetic** — costume is capable to express both individual aesthetic tastes and preferences of person and general representations about beauty. In costume the aesthetic ideal of certain society is shown.

One may notice that all given functions, except for last, aesthetic, can play both pragmatical, utilitarian and a symbolical role. Really, for example, the magic has both the symbolics and pragmatics, connected with fact that in ancient societies the magic takes an important place in system of practical activities. Therefore one can name as symbolical all functions from the above-stated list, including protective and utilitarian functions of clothes.

## References

1. Zimmel' G. *Konflikt sovremennoi kul'tury* [*Conflict of Modern Culture*]. Pg., 1923. (In Russian)

**For citation:** Bystrova Y.V. Costume Symbols: Typology of functions. *Vestnik SPbSU. Series 17. Philosophy. Conflict studies. Culture studies. Religious studies*, 2016, issue 4, pp. 85–90.  
DOI: 10.21638/11701/spbu17.2016.409

Received: 12.05.2016

Accepted: 16.06.2016